

Luca Guadagnino's *After the Hunt*: Zero net displacement on a flat plane

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"If a person walks two miles east, two miles west, two miles north and two miles south, where will he or she end up?"

Ask AI, ask anyone

"He or she will end up back where he or she started because the two miles east and two miles west cancel each other out, as do the two miles north and two miles south, resulting in zero net displacement on a flat plane."

This is the general experience of *After the Hunt*, directed by Luca Guadagnino, with Julia Roberts, Andrew Garfield, Michael Stuhlbarg, Ayo Edebiri and Chloë Sevigny. It sets out the various sides in an episode where a sexual assault has been alleged with such even-handedness that drawing larger conclusions is challenging. The various ambiguities remain largely that, ambiguities.

The film is set on the Yale University campus in New Haven, Connecticut. It opens in September 2019.

Alma Imhoff (Roberts), a philosophy professor, is married to calm, Zen-like therapist Frederik Mendelssohn (Stuhlbarg). She has recently returned to work, and obviously still suffers from either anxiety, a serious medical problem, or both.

Alma is good friends with—and a former lover of—combustible younger colleague Hank Gibson (Garfield), and both are up for tenure ("It's just a threshold to more freedom"). The day after an alcohol-soaked party at Alma and Frederik's, Maggie Resnick (Edebiri), a promising black PhD student from a wealthy, donor family, shows up outside their house and alleges that Hank assaulted her the previous night.

-He crossed the line. He kept going after I said no.

-But what actually happened?

-Why do you need to know? He assaulted me. Does it need to get worse than that?

Hank strenuously denies the incident ("an utter fabrication"), insisting that Maggie is revenging herself on him because he accused her of plagiarizing her dissertation. She is also involved with a non-binary partner, Alex (Lío Mehiel).

Both Maggie and Hank ask for Alma's support. He gets summarily fired, prior to any inquiry. Alma seems caught in the crossfire. Maggie finds a newspaper clipping revealing that Alma, at 15, had accused her father's friend of rape, but later admitted she lied. Maggie tells her version of what happened with Hank to a reporter.

Alma forges a prescription for her difficulties, and gets caught. Hank admits his continuing feelings for her, and presses the issue,

forcing her to kick him out of her studio. When Alma returns to the Yale campus, she gets surrounded by #MeToo protesters, claiming she hasn't sufficiently supported Maggie. She collapses in pain.

An epilogue takes place five years later. The various characters have moved forward with their lives and careers.

First of all, the picture of the academic life and milieu presented in the film is not a flattering one. Various names are dropped: Nietzsche, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Aristotle ("xenophobe"), Freud ("a misogynist"), Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer* and postmodernist Michel Foucault and the Panopticon. All of this to little effect. The professors and students are mostly concerned with their academic ambitions, rivalries, identity politics issues and, frankly, showing off. The state of the world and the pursuit of methods of thinking, for example, that would allow them to make better sense of it don't appear to be of interest to anyone.

Is Guadagnino satirizing these people and this world? One would think (or hope) so, but it might not be the case. The Italian director plays his "non-judgmental" cards close to his vest.

Guadagnino (*I Am Love*, *A Bigger Splash*, *Call Me by Your Name*) has made a series of intelligent, rather vague films about the upper middle class and its discontents. He set *A Bigger Splash*, a "pseudo-erotic thriller" (according to the WSWs) about a rock star and her filmmaker boyfriend whose idyllic holiday is disrupted by the arrival of her ex-lover and his daughter, on the island of Pantelleria, off the coast of Sicily. The island was one of the main arrival points for desperate, impoverished refugees fleeing Africa and the war-torn Middle East. The film barely touches on that appalling situation.

Justifying his decision not to concentrate more on the refugee issue, the director asserted in an interview at the time that, "You have to stick to your point of view when you do a movie." It seems, the WSWs noted, that "Guadagnino consciously decided not to shift the focus from his inconsequential 'reality' to one a hundred times more compelling and tragic."

Roberts, Garfield, Stuhlbarg and Chloë Sevigny perform effectively and convincingly. Roberts-Alma, stumbling blindly through the goings-on, is genuinely moving in a number of scenes. *After the Hunt*, whether it fully means to or not, does portray a social grouping entirely unprepared for the war on democratic rights to come, including the assault on universities—for the attempt to establish a police-state dictatorship. These are self-involved, complacent individuals. Maggie, with her insufferable smugness, may be the worst.

One character (Sevigny), a therapist, observes:

But after all these years, it's gotten so f—— hard for me to listen to these kids when they have had everything, everything handed to them in their lives, insist that the world stop at the first small injustice. There's almost this possessiveness they have to their pain. How they nurse every slight, every bump in the road every blip of victimization as if it's the only thing that can affirm them.

Well said! Unfortunately, Nora Garrett's script generally turns around at such points and, according to the principle of "equal time," offers the "other side of the story."

Is *After the Hunt*, when all is said and done, hostile to the #MeToo witch-hunt? It certainly raises questions about it. (According to the *New York Times*' Michelle Goldberg, the film "Seethes With Anti-Woke Resentment." The opening credits deliberately pay homage to Woody Allen's style, using the same white font on a black screen, listing the cast members alphabetically, etc.) Hank's firing, on the basis of one claim, is obviously unfair and undemocratic. There has been no time for any investigation whatsoever. But Hank later proves to be brutish when drunk, so could he perhaps be guilty of something?

Maggie has possible reasons for fabricating the incident or exaggerating it. She appeals to Alma:

-Alma, Alma. It really happened? I didn't just make it up, right? It's real?

-If it's real to you, it's real.

Now that's helpful. Either a sexual assault, or semi-assault, occurred or it didn't. Guadagnino and Garrett could have shown us or otherwise indicated what took place. This isn't a documentary about an incident the truth of which is unknown to anyone except the participants. The filmmakers *invented* it. Even if the episode was messy or its unfolding indistinct, occurring in some sort of moral or sexual grey zone, the film could have been perfectly *clear* about its *unclear*.

Is Maggie to be believed or not?

Alma: "I think Hank crossed a line. I think he violated something she held to be deeply sacred. The student-teacher relationship. And I think one could make the argument that, when a power differential is involved consent and the ability to give it is inherently incapacitated to the point of rendering the question all but moot."

Later, however, as the tensions and pressures mount, Alma turns on Maggie and speaks some harsh truths:

Not everything is supposed to make you comfortable, Maggie. Not everything is supposed to be a lukewarm bath for you to sink into until you fall asleep and drown. ... It's all lies. Living in an apartment that's ten times cheaper than what you can afford? Dating a person you have nothing in common with because you think their identity makes you interesting?

Fawning over me because you think my affection offers you credibility, another adoptive mother to replace your own insufferable one. It's all lies. Christ, it's no wonder everyone thinks you lied about Hank, too.

Sharp words are also spoken at other moments about the "privileged coddled hypocrites" at Yale, about "kowtowing to a mediocre student with rich parents," about the fact that "rich kids are filthy, because they've been looked after their entire lives."

Alma, because of her history of falsely accusing that older man when she was a teenager (he later committed suicide), treats Maggie's account with a degree of skepticism. But in regard to that earlier incident, Frederik points out that, at 15, "it doesn't matter if you wanted him, it doesn't matter if you threw yourself at him, he should have rejected you outright."

So, back and forth, back and forth, sometimes interestingly, sometimes not. Nobody's right, nobody's wrong. "Everyone has his reasons." And everyone comes across as somewhat shabby, selfish, underhanded. *After the Hunt* apparently owes its title to a remark attributed to Bismarck, "There is never as much lying as *before* an election, *during* a war and *after* a hunt." It's odd for filmmakers to choose such a cynical title, which suggests we are going to watch liars tell lies for two hours.

#MeToo wasn't primarily about who was making things up and who wasn't. Nor was it about the basic right of women not to be assaulted in the workplace, classroom or anywhere else. It was an eruption in the upper middle class, manipulated by the Democratic Party, the *New York Times*, etc., as a diversion in 2017 from a genuinely left-wing movement against Donald Trump and, simultaneously, as a means for already privileged layers to settle professional scores and reorganize the executive suite (or staffroom), to gain privileges and milk positions.

Furthermore, it should be recognized by now that #MeToo's systematic attacks on due process and the presumption of innocence, and its resorting to anonymous sources and unproven allegations to end careers, only smoothed the path for the extreme right in its assault on elementary constitutional rights.



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